

02. Some Side Notes on Treasure(d) Islands

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Bringing together scholars from different research backgrounds, the Nichibunken symposium “Pirates’ View of World History” was a challenging journey through time and space transcending the boundaries of cultures and disciplines. Its presentations ransacked through various dimensions and forms of piracy. The concept of piracy proved particularly insightful as it necessitates critical reflection on the normative structures that frame our objects of study as well as our take on them. Pirates subvert systems that circulate goods and ideas of a hegemonic order, yet piratical methods can also be hijacked or corrupted by the hegemonic system. The concept urges us to take into account the forces at play in defining and discriminating against the pirate, as well as the interests, practices, and means of the actors/actants involved.

The practice of abducting things and ideas from their “original” context to (re-) assess their value has been fundamental for the establishment of “art” as field of practice on its own. Academies and museums as hoard of objects and knowledge have been part of nation-building politics, as have evaluation systems such as cultural heritages and national treasures. However, similar to Stevenson’s description of his borrowings from Dafoe, Poe, and Irving for his novel *Treasure Island* (1882) as “plagiarism [that] was rarely carried farther,” also throughout art history, piracy has constantly generated new artistic questions and forms. The Latin term “spolia” (plunder) even has become an art history term. Originality, singularity, specificity, and inventiveness have been seen as important for artists’ establishment of brand value. The question of value and “interest” also affects scholarly research, as art historians have to cope with diffuse systems of copyrights, authorship, and ownership. However, rather than pitting isolated “brands” and “styles” against each other, it is more insightful to conceive their relationship as one of dynamic response.

However, in pirate stories a “treasure island” is where plots gravitate. Pirates have their own rules and social orders, but their allegiances are often based on material interests, and their teamwork ends (sometimes lethally) with finding the treasure or ending up empty-handed. Collected from all over the world, the same treasure is potentially not appreciated the same way by all pirates. Usually it had been gathered and hidden by another pirate for later use. Once the treasure is retrieved, the hidden island is not interesting any more. There are also questions and problems surrounding the idea of treasure islands, such as violence, exclusion and secrecy, which often develop around maps and knowledge. It is also a pity that islands that were not yet exploited by humans are dug up in attempts to find treasure and then left behind. (As Kuwabara Saburō showed, Fukuzawa Yukichi criticized Momotarō for invading the island of oni [ogres] and taking their treasures.) The idea of a treasure island leads to rather destructive acts if the journey is driven by a craving for somebody else’s treasure.

Yet if an island itself is considered as treasure, a treasure island perhaps could become a friendlier place. This shift might enable us to value the journey and the stay on the island as well as help us be attentive and open to new discoveries and careful with resources. Maybe one will

only see the preciousness afterwards, as often is the case with “epistemic objects” that, according to Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, generate new insights unexpectedly. In this case, the treasure is a part of the research process that is not cognized. This reminds us of the Latin word *thesaurus*, the French word *trésor*, and the old meaning of *takara* 宝 : spaces or containers to store cherished things, instead of the objects themselves. Things become a treasure when extracted from their usual contexts and put together into a new framework and taking on a new meaning. *Thesauri* do not give stable and unchanging definitions, but open up a field in which one can search for a fitting expression using a roster of possible synonyms and sometimes take a detour from one’s original query. It is this state of “inbetweenness” and in relationality that meaning is constituted and revealed. While piratical skills do certainly help in finding these islands, we should keep in mind the Okinawan phrase *nuchi du takara* (life is a treasure).